



# Why context matters: a comparative perspective on education reform and policy implementation

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## Abstract

This article explores the significance of context within the process of contemporary education reform and policy-making. It draws upon evidence from a comparative study of educational change and transformation in seven education systems: Australia, England, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Russia, and Singapore. The article focuses on school leadership preparation, training, and development, which has become a policy priority and central improvement strategy in many education systems. The article explores how seven education systems are using this strategy to promote school and system improvement. The article reflects upon the centrality of context in the process of policy implementation and in the broader pursuit of system transformation. The article concludes that more contextually appropriate approaches to educational policy selection are needed and that borrowing approaches from other countries many bring unintended consequences and unfortunate side effects. Further, the article concludes that the process of policy implementation, in context, requires far more attention, if the intended outcomes are to be achieved.

**Keywords** Education reform · Education change · PISA · Systemic change · School improvement · System reform

## 1 Introduction

The global knowledge economy is ‘a game changer’ with policy-makers, in different countries, seeking ways to significantly improve their education systems (Harris and Jones 2015a, b; Schleicher 2014, 2018; Stewart 2012). One of the strongest lessons from the past decade of education reform is that the quality of policy implementation, rather than policy selection, is the key to promoting and sustaining educational improvement (Fullan 2018; Harris et al. 2013). Yet, policy-makers around the world still seem over preoccupied with identifying the ‘right’ policies to secure change and improvement, rather than considering the conditions and contextual factors that are most likely to make any chosen policy effective in practice.

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The educational challenges of the new global marketplace are extensive and complex. Large-scale international assessments, like Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), have encouraged policy-makers to look to other education systems and, in some cases, to seek ready-made policy solutions (Darling Hammond and Rothman 2011; Tucker 2011). Some commentators have argued that PISA is now a major driver of policy selection, globally, and has encouraged the adoption of certain policies over others (Sahlberg 2015). It has been proposed that PISA performance is now the main catalyst for changes in policy direction in many countries and a force for greater global competition (Breakspear 2012; Sellar and Lingard 2018).

PISA has also fuelled a propensity among policy-makers to ‘look where the superior performance is, where countries are getting much better results at lower costs’ (Harris and Jones 2017; Tucker 2011, p. 1). Consequently, policy solutions are being borrowed or copied from the ‘best’ education systems in the anticipation of securing improved performance and outcomes (Auld and Morris 2014; Harris and Jones 2017; Morris 2012). As Alexander (2012, p. 4) notes, it is hardly surprising that policy-makers believe that the better performing systems ‘have something to teach us,’ but cautions that it is the translation of policies from one context into another that is highly problematic.

Despite much critique about PISA and its inherent fuelling of certain policy directions and policy borrowing (Harris et al. 2014, 2016; Ravitch 2013; Zhao 2016), this international assessment looks set to continue. The global policy discourse remains preoccupied with learning from the best and transporting their strategies and policies (Barber and Mourshed 2007; Jensen et al. 2012; Lingard 2018; Mourshed et al. 2010). In the rush to emulate the PISA performance of the ‘best education systems’, it has been argued that important contextual and cultural differences, which exist within and between education systems, are often ignored or conveniently sidelined (Harris and Jones 2017).

Evidence shows how powerful contextual and cultural influences affect policy implementation in significant ways (Harris and Jones 2015a, b; Teddlie et al. 2000; Zhao 2016). It also reinforces how the effectiveness of any policy cannot be independent of context and culture but rather is profoundly shaped and moulded by it (Harris and Jones 2017; Sellar and Lingard 2018).

This article will consider the process of policy-making across different contexts by focusing upon a popular improvement strategy, namely leadership preparation, training, and development. Based upon data from a large-scale comparative research study, which adopted a ‘world culture’ theoretical perspective (Kauko and Wermke 2018), the article considers two main questions: firstly, to what extent do contextual and cultural factors affect policy delivery and implementation? Secondly, how do the challenges of implementing change, in different contexts, affect outcomes?

The article will explore how education systems, of varying scope, scale, and size, are tackling the process of implementing and consolidating change. The article will consider how context affects the process of policy implementation and sustainability. It commences with an overview of the comparative study that will inform the discussion of context that follows in the remainder of this article.

## 2 The 7 system leadership study (7SLS)

In 2012, a research study commenced with the core purpose of exploring how leadership preparation and development in schools were approached in very different education systems.

The aim of the study was not to detail or routinely document various leadership programmes, in individual countries, as others have already adequately covered this territory (e.g. Bush 2012; Huber 2004; Moorosi and Bush 2011). Instead, the main purpose of the study was to collect primary, empirical data about leadership preparation and development programmes in seven very different education systems and to provide a comparative analysis (Harris et al. 2014; Harris and Jones 2015a, b).

In all seven countries, a clear policy focus upon, and a strategy for, leadership, preparation, and training existed (Harris and Jones 2015a, b). Often, it is a presupposed that those systems performing less well simply have an absence of the strategies deployed by the better systems or that their strategies are deficit in some way. This study found such assumptions to be inherently faulty, as many of the education systems considered to be low performing were deploying the exact same strategies as those performing at the other end of the spectrum (Harris and Jones 2015a, b). Inevitably, this refocuses attention upon the capacity to deliver and processes of implementation rather than the strategies selected. As this article will highlight, the reasons for differential system performance go far beyond the selection of certain strategies or reform processes over others.

The term 'system' was used in the study rather than 'nation' because in large countries, like Russia, Indonesia, and Australia, only a sample of municipalities, regions, or states could practically be included in the data collection. These sub-systems became the focus of empirical investigation. The selection of the seven countries and their education systems was guided by several factors, the first of these being size. The 7SL deliberately selected very large education systems such as Russia and Indonesia, along with medium size and smaller education systems. Many of the high-performing systems tend to be relatively small systems such as Singapore, Finland, and Hong Kong. Consequently, the study aimed to consider the challenges of policy change and implementation on a dramatically different scale.

Secondly, the selection of the seven education systems was guided by a range of economic indicators (Khan et al. 2014; World Bank Indicators 2012). All the countries in the study are at very different stages of economic growth and development, which allowed us to look at the impact of wider contextual factors on policy implementation. Thirdly, the selected education systems reflect very different cultures and traditions and vary considerably in terms of diversity, ethnicity, language, and religion, this adding other layers of contextual complexity. Finally, as noted earlier, certain education systems (e.g. Indonesia, Australia, and Russia) have strong sub-systems at the municipality, district, state, republic, or territory level, thus allowing a consideration of micro-political influences and contextual differences on policy implementation.

The 7SLS project adopted a 'world culture approach' (Kauko and Wermke 2018) and incorporated a mixed methods design, including surveys and multi-site qualitative case studies (Yin 1994, 2003). The quantitative component of the study utilised a survey instrument adapted from Kouzes and Posner's (2012) Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI). As adjustments were made to the original LPI, the 7SLS principal questionnaire was piloted and was subjected to Rasch analysis to test its reliability and construct validity.

Case study accounts were developed drawing upon semi-structured interviews with a sample of principals and teachers in each country along with a range of documentary data. In each of the countries, multi-stage sampling was used to identify respondents to the principals' questionnaire ( $n = 150$ ). Hence, the sampling process involved various stages using smaller and smaller units at each stage. In the case of the selection of the schools in each country ( $n = 20$ ), the expert advisors assisted with the identification of schools based on a stratified sampling process. The expert advisors came from universities in each of the countries and assisted, where required, with access to schools, data collection, and translation.

Literature reviews were undertaken that examined leadership development and training in each country. An analysis of school level documents, national policies, and a range of training materials also supplemented the evidential base. Case study accounts were developed for each country based on both the quantitative and qualitative data gathering and analysis. The expert advisors in each country assisted with the contextual detail and checked the accuracy of the representation and interpretation of the data.

Qualitative data collection and data analysis were closely integrated and dialogically linked. ATLAS.ti was used to analyse the semi-structured interview data and other multimedia data. A range of documentary evidence was collected, along with a range of evidence relating to individual system performance. The expert teams worked with the project leaders and their research team, to assist with data collection, analysis, and writing.

A large number of publications have resulted from the 7SLS research project that outline central findings and conclusions (e.g. Bysik et al. 2015; Harris and Jones 2015a, b; Harris and Jones 2017; Harris et al. 2013, 2014; Harris and Jones 2017; Jones et al. 2015). It is not the intention here, therefore, to repeat the commentaries from previous published work. Instead, this article will look specifically at how far context and culture affect policy implementation and outcomes, from the vantage point of the 7SLS. The next section outlines the main theoretical perspectives that informed the research study and its findings.

### 3 Theoretical perspectives

The 7 system leadership study was informed by two interrelated theories. The first is human capital theory, and the second is social capital theory. The term ‘human capital’ can be traced back to the early 1960s, when Schultz (1961) proposed that human capital consisted of the ‘knowledge, skills and abilities of the people employed in an organisation’ (p. 140). Later, Schultz (1992) refined this definition to, ‘all human abilities to be either innate or acquired. Attributes which are valuable and can be augmented by appropriate investment will be human capital’ (p. 21).

In their work, Frank and Bernanke (2007) and Acemoglu and Autor (2009) emphasise the role of human capital on worker productivity in their respective definitions. Ployhart et al. (2014) define human capital in the broader context of organisational outcomes and performance. In labour economics, the standard view of human capital is a set of skills or characteristics that increase a worker’s productivity. Human capital theory, therefore, underlines the importance of developing human capability to achieve set goals or outcomes.

It terms of contemporary education policy, it is clear to see how human capital theory continues to be hugely influential. The quality of schooling has been the central focus of the OECD’s mantra for change, since it is the most easily observable component of human capital investments. Hence, there is a growing policy focus on human capital needs and improved educational attainment in response to the increased demand for highly educated and highly skilled workers.

The OECD’s position on school transformation and change largely reflects this human capital position. For example, Sellar and Lingard (2018) argue that human capital theory has significantly influenced the prominence of large-scale international assessments like PISA:

The OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) ... has become one of the OECD’s most successful ‘products’ and has both strengthened the role of the Directorate for Education within the organization and enhanced the significance of the organization in education globally. The OECD is expanding PISA by broadening

the *scope* of what is measured; increasing the *scale* of the assessment to cover more countries, systems and schools; and enhancing its *explanatory power* to provide policy-makers with better information. (p. 1)

This theoretical perspective places a huge responsibility on education systems to deliver appropriate human capital solutions to meet the needs of a changing job market. As human capital corresponds to productivity then by default, it assumes that economic prosperity chiefly depends upon a country's ability to deliver well-qualified and educated citizens. Therefore, it places huge pressure on education systems to perform and encourages instrumental approaches to improve performance.

Closely related to the idea of human capital theory is social capital theory. It has been proposed that social capital is important because, like human capital, it has the potential to make a positive difference to organisational performance and system improvement (Wei et al. 2011). In their work, Cohen and Prusak (2001) define social capital as the 'stock of active connections between people, the trust, mutual understanding and shared values and behaviours that bind the members of human networks and communities together and make co-operative action possible' (p. 4).

Most recently, Leana and Frits (2006) have suggested that social capital refers to the resources in the relationships among actors and that it is a core component of school success. They emphasise the social dimensions of work as a critical component in organisational performance in a range of contexts. Their research found that 'the more able teachers (those with the strongest human capital) benefitted from ties with other teachers even if the number of such ties was not that large' (Leana and Frits 2006, p. 117). They propose that linking human capital to social capital is important as it challenges outdated notions of professional development and learning. Social capital theory implies that the interpersonal dimension of the work context is critical for transformation and improvement (Quintero 2017).

Human capital theory and social capital theory both reinforce how the development of, and interactions between individuals, lead to better economic outcomes and performance. In this respect, investment in leadership development in schools is a clear strategy to build the capacity to improve individual performance (human capital) and collective performance (social capital). Consequently, this theoretical framing and analysis will be returned to later. This article now considers how different education systems are investing in leadership training and development, at scale, in the pursuit of increased human and social capital.

## 4 Context

The rationale for investing in leadership preparation and development, at scale, emanates from a corpus of international evidence linking leadership to organisational and student improvement (Leithwood et al. 2008). In addition, contemporary accounts of the 'high-performing systems' and countrywide reports by the OECD highlight the importance of leadership development as a lever of system improvement. As Mourshed et al. (2010) note, the 'top performing countries leverage a substantial and growing knowledge about what constitutes effective school leadership to develop their principals into drivers of instruction' (p. 4). This is a persuasive argument for investing heavily in leadership development and training in schools.

Evidence from the 7SLS highlighted that all systems were investing in leadership development and training as a clear improvement strategy. It also showed, however, that were at very different stages. In Hong Kong and Singapore, for example, policy-makers clearly subscribe to the belief that school leadership is the key to system transformation and put this into practice through well-designed and centrally implemented programmes (Harris et al. 2014). Singapore and Hong Kong both have distinctive and well-established leadership preparation and development programmes that are effective (Ng 2008).

Regarding the other education systems in the study (i.e. Australia, England, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Russia), the study found significant investment in leadership development and training. For example, in 1999, Malaysia adopted the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) that was designed in England<sup>1,2</sup> (IAB 2014). In 2013, the revised and renamed National Professional Qualification for Educational Leaders (NPQEL) was made mandatory for all aspiring principals in Malaysia.

In 2009, the Indonesian Minister of Education released a regulation (6/2009) stating that to be a principal, school leadership training was now mandatory (MoNe 2009). A national agency under the ministry was subsequently established in 2010<sup>3</sup> to provide centralised training, located in Solo, Central Java (LP2KS 2015). This training programme called the 'Development of Principals Managerial Skills' was heavily borrowed from the NPQH qualification. While the NPQH was not borrowed in its entirety, as in the case of Malaysia, the design principles and content of the programme were heavily replicated.

In Australia, at present, there are federal standards for school principals but no central certification or qualification to become a principal. Each state or territory has its own requirements regarding the appointment, training, and development of principals. As such, there is wide variation in the leadership development programmes and frameworks across the country (Dinham et al. 2011). In 2011, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) was established with a mandate to 'develop and maintain rigorous standards for teaching and school leadership and to foster and drive high quality professional development for teachers and school leaders'.<sup>4</sup>

In 2011, AITSL published the 'National Professional Standard for Principals' to map out what principals are expected to know and understand to be effective twenty-first century leaders (AITSL 2011, 2014). In 2015, two reports commissioned by AITSL (Jensen et al. 2015; Waterston 2015) reviewed leadership development provision in Australia and signalled an intention to move towards a national leadership qualification.

Until relatively recently, in Russia, very little was known about the training and preparation of school principals. National data were not available or not readily shared, so it is impossible to trace the history of school leadership in Russia in Soviet times with any degree of accuracy. The responsibility for any training, preparation, or certification, at present, resides firmly at the regional or municipal level with significant variation in nature and quality of provision (Bysik et al. 2015). A new centrally managed, national qualification is now planned for all principals in Russia. International 'best practice' is being considered, and various programmes have been highlighted as potentially fit for purpose. The NPQH is one source of evidence currently under review to inform the design of the new programme (Bysik et al. 2015).

<sup>1</sup> Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

<sup>2</sup> Since 1997, the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) has been in place in England. It remains the gold standard of leadership preparation and development even though this qualification is no longer mandatory.

<sup>3</sup> Agency for School Principal Empowerment and Development.

<sup>4</sup> Aitsl.edu.au p1.

Evidence from the 7SLS highlights more similarity than difference, concerning the policy choices relating to leadership development and training in schools and also some direct borrowing from other countries (Harris and Jones 2017). The study found that all systems have introduced, or are in the process of producing, national leadership qualifications or programmes. All have national agencies or bodies to oversee the delivery of national leadership standards or qualifications. Where they differ dramatically, however, is the implementation of such policies and, more specifically, the variability in the contexts in which this implementation takes effect. The study found that contextual and cultural factors affected implementation processes in powerful and often unanticipated ways (Harris and Jones 2015a, b). The article now looks at the influence of context and culture on policy implementation in more depth.

## 5 Reflections

This section reflects on the questions highlighted at the start of this article—firstly, to what extent do contextual and cultural factors affect policy delivery and implementation, and secondly, how do the challenges of implementing change, in different contexts, affect outcomes? To answer these questions requires a much closer look at the cultural and contextual contours of the education systems in the 7SLS. As noted already, one critical contextual factor is the sheer scale and size of the system.

In Malaysia, there are over 10,000 schools with a large proportion located in small, rural, and remote areas. In Russia, there are 48,891 public schools, and the country has six different time zones. In Indonesia, there are 172,802 public schools spread over a massive archipelago. Income inequalities are high, and poverty levels, particularly in remote or rural areas, are acute in all three countries. In stark contrast, Singapore and Hong Kong are wealthy and developed nations. They are much smaller by comparison, with a history of successful educational reform and reliable implementation processes. In these smaller education systems, the chance of fidelity implementation is far greater and any variability in delivery is significantly reduced (Harris et al. 2013). In the larger systems, there is a reliance on local implementation processes, i.e. districts, municipalities which often result in dramatic differences in delivery and inconsistencies in interpretation (Bysik et al. 2015).

In Malaysia, Indonesia, and Russia, the education systems are under strong, centralised control with top-down pressure to deliver. All too frequently, this pressure is not accompanied by the capacity or the human capital required or needed to fully embed policies in the system (Harris and Jones 2015a, b). In Singapore, while policies are also driven from the centre, it has been argued that a more organic and participative approach has evolved ‘where the burden of implementation shifts from the “headquarters to the schools”’ (Ng 2010, p. 180). Thus, the process of implementation is more localised and streamlined, in this context, than that possible in the larger education systems.

In Malaysia, control over education policies and processes emanates from the ministry and then moves to the district level and finally to the school. In the larger education systems because of the likelihood of greater variance and variability, there was a far greater emphasis upon monitoring and compliance. In Russia, the findings revealed that principals and teachers felt they were part of a managerial culture where conformity with rules and regulations was imperative (Harris and Jones 2017). In Malaysia, Indonesia, and Russia, the cultural norms and system signals reinforced a heavy sense of duty among school leaders to comply (Bysik et al. 2015).

In both Malaysia, Indonesia, and Russia, the evidence highlighted how the dominant cultural norms of conformity and compliance meant that teachers and principals rarely ques-

tioned or departed from the stipulations laid out by the Ministry of Education or the district. In these contexts, non-compliance was viewed by principals and teachers as a serious matter with a range of potential penalties. Also, the data suggest that any non-compliance by principals and teachers would attract negative responses from those in authority and those within the local community (Harris and Jones 2017).

The study found that strong cultural expectations and contextual factors largely explained the nature and the quality and effectiveness of the policy implementation process in the different systems (Harris and Jones 2015a, b). Even if a policy was well thought through, borrowed, adapted, or copied wholesale, the study found that the implementation process deployed directly affected the outcomes and impact (Harris and Jones 2017). In other words, the same strategy implemented in very different contexts results in highly variable outcomes and impact. For example, in Indonesia, a new leadership qualification was introduced centrally and was delivered locally through the municipalities (LP2KS 2015). From interviews with principals and teachers in Indonesia, it was apparent that this qualification was not influencing the selection of principals in any significant way. Even though hundreds of principals completed this qualification, very few became principals. This apparent contradiction can be explained in terms of culture and context. In summary, local politics and proximity to the mayor were the prime way in which principals were chosen for their post, irrespective of the qualification (Sumintono et al. 2015).

Within this study, the sociocultural contexts in which the principals and teachers found themselves clearly shaped their actions and explained marked differences in reaction to the same policy. Different sociocultural contexts reinforce different value sets as well as the norms of behaviour. Hofstede's (1980) framework of national culture features widely in the comparative education literature and highlights the way in which 'power distance' and 'collectivism' shape the responses to policy in different societal contexts. Evidence from the study clearly showed that principals and teachers who worked in more hierarchical structures such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Russia were far less willing to depart from rules and regulations or to take risks with policy implementation. In direct contrast, principals and teachers from Australia or England felt far greater liberty to interpret policy broadly and to see it as a guide for action.

There were also some other important cultural norms that explained marked differences in responses from principals and teachers. For example, in Malaysia and Indonesia, principals feel a strong cultural need to maintain harmony and to avoid any potential conflict with staff or parents (Harris and Jones 2017). In addition, principals and teachers stated that they would only fulfil those responsibilities that were clearly within their job description and would not venture into any areas that were not clearly stipulated. In contrast, principals from England and Australia stated that they felt that challenging others from within or outside the school was a part of their job and that while job descriptions existed there was a much more fluid response to their work within a school. The evidence showed that principals in less hierarchical systems spoke more readily and openly about the need to establish collaborative relationships among staff to build social capital (Harris and Jones 2015a, b).

In contrast, principals in the more hierarchical systems assumed a more traditional set of boundaries around their role and did not believe that they should or could share leadership in any way, as their job description did not encompass this expectation. These findings align with research undertaken by Lee and Hallinger (2012) that similarly showed marked differences in the way principals acted and responded to policy changes within very different societal contexts because of role expectations that were heavily shaped by cultural norms.

The level of socio-economic development of a country represents another important contextual variable. The 7SLS found that the role of the principal, its expectations, and its



structural definitions varied from country to country. In Russia, principals normally have a second job to supplement their income. Often, they take on the role of a teacher at their own school or work as a caretaker or a cleaner (Harris and Jones 2017). In Malaysia, the principal or head teacher is a ministry employee and so is part of the civil service with all the associated expectations and constraints. In Indonesia, the local mayor hires the principals within the municipality and the appointment is centrally based on party political considerations. In England, head teachers are appointed by a board of governors and have far greater autonomy over finances, decision-making, and the strategic direction of the school.

The study found that the social, political, cultural, and micro-political architecture within each country significantly influenced the priority that principals and teachers gave to certain activities and certain policy imperatives. The study found that cultural and contextual influences, while often factored out of any policy selection, remain highly potent, subterranean determinants of policy implementation and success.

## 6 Conclusion

The last part of the article considers the implications for education reform and policy implementation arising from this study. Firstly, considering the theoretical framing of the study, what are the implications for human and social capital development? As highlighted earlier, the OECD has become a global advocate for investing in human capital to meet the challenges of the knowledge economy. Within the global discourse on education reform, both human capital and social capital are firmly centre stage. As Brian (2007) proposes ‘in the global knowledge economy, people’s skills, learning, talents and attributes—their human capital—have become both key to their ability to earn a living and to wider economic growth. Education systems can do much to help people realise their potential but when they fail it can lead to lifelong social and economic problems’ (p. 1).

Discussions about human capital development tend, however, not to factor in or feature any serious consideration of the cultural and contextual constraints that might exist in different countries. Instead, the central implication is that education systems, alone, are responsible for delivering or not delivering the human capital required for economic prosperity and social development. As Brown and Lauder (2001) argue, however, taking a human capital position on education implies a ‘learning equals earning’ relationship that is unlikely to be borne out in a new economic reality characterised as a ‘global auction for jobs.’ They challenge the basic premise of human capital theory and its core assumption that more human capital in any system is a good thing, proposing instead that it is the type of human capital and its location that will matter most in the future.

In policy terms, the rhetoric of both human capital and social capital continues to justify certain education policy decisions, at least for the moment. The findings from this study highlight two important caveats. Firstly, the contextual and cultural make-up of certain countries means that the same policies aimed at developing human capital may have remarkably divergent and different outcomes. Secondly, that in some societies the idea of social capital, which is inherently bound up with ideas of empowerment, collective decision-making, professional autonomy, and shared leadership, will not be necessarily welcomed, endorsed, or delivered.

Turning next to the issue of differential performance and policy implementation. As Green (2003) notes:

Comparative analysis remains the most powerful tool for (causal) explanations of societal aspects of the educational process. Globalisation does not reduce its usefulness,

although in creating educational spaces which belong exclusively to neither nations nor systems it makes us look to broadening our units of analysis. (p. 47)

The findings from this study suggest that explanations of differential system performance require a broadening of the units of analysis. Accounts of system performance tend to highlight structural solutions or interventions that, we are told, are responsible for securing better outcomes and performance (Darling Hammond et al. 2007).

Yet, given the diversity and complexity of education systems, it is highly unlikely that one, two, or even ten things might account for the way a system performs. The structural attributions for better system outcomes are just that, attributions. There is no scientific way of knowing whether, how, and in what way these structural features are, in fact, responsible for lifting performance or if replication of the approaches of the high performers offers any other countries the chance at all of the achieving the same outcomes.

The findings from the 7SLS suggest that explanations of differential system performance need much more forensic attention and acknowledgement of cultural and contextual influences. The findings imply that the context in which policy implementation is undertaken requires far greater consideration and understanding. The writing on implementation science still fails to give sufficient acknowledgement and latitude to the influence of cultural and contextual factors (Harris et al. 2013). It is as if culture and context are just a benign backdrop for policy implementation, so largely irrelevant and unimportant.

Going forward, the challenge for those working within education reform and policy will be to anticipate, understand, and factor in the unique cultural and contextual dynamics that shape any education change process. In summary, it is high time that context and culture were brought 'out of the shadows' (Hallinger 2018) in policy terms and firmly factored back into explanations of policy success or failure. If not, our accounts of education reform will continue to be partial and potentially misleading, thus making our attempts at education change fragile.

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